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Guidelines for...

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**DEALING WITH
DIFFERING
VIEWPOINTS**

Controversy
is pervasive,
even valued,
in a
democratic
society.



Controversy occurs when a person's or group's ideas, conclusions, theories, or opinions are in opposition to those of another person or group.

The study of controversial subjects is essential to the education of all citizens in a free society. In preparation for contributing to a healthy society, students must learn to gather and examine evidence; differentiate opinion, fact, and inference; evaluate differing viewpoints with objectivity; and define and justify their personal points of view. By stressing the use of facts to justify decisions, the importance of developing alternatives, and use of appropriate problem solving skills, teaching about controversial issues can impart real “survival skills” while bringing relevancy to the classroom.

What is controversial in one place and time may not be in another. Topics related to resource use and management are often controversial in Alaska. Our state economy is based on resource extraction, yet many also value Alaska’s undeveloped and “untouched” areas.

Although most school curriculum is built around activities that present factual, non-controversial information, there are some topics and activities that are potentially controversial within Alaskan communities. Rather than avoiding these topics, we encourage you to use the following guidelines.

Curriculum Selection & Lesson Preparation...

- ☐ Determine whether or not a specific issue is grade-level appropriate and relevant to the student.
- ☐ Choose issues that relate directly to the curriculum being studied and to the goals and objectives of this unit of study.
- ☐ Determine whether or not enough factual information can be gathered on the various points of view related to an issue.
- ☐ Be clear about what alternative positions will be presented in dealing with a controversial issue.
- ☐ Decide on your own opinion/position on the topic so that you can recognize your own biases.
- ☐ Use community resources and expertise, making sure that you choose people and materials to present more than one side of an issue, while being sensitive to differing cultural values in your presentation and selection. Have students prepare questions for guest speakers.
- ☐ Design the unit to teach citizenship skills such as critical thinking, listening, decision making, and problem solving as well as loyalty to democratic principles.
- ☐ Use your community resources to adapt issues for local relevance, while presenting the “big picture” as well.
- ☐ Examine curriculum content and topics for cultural bias and include cultural sensitivity and respect for diversity.

In the Classroom...

- ☐ Develop a climate of trust, respect, and openness to free inquiry in the classroom as well as respect for the student's right to privacy, right to hold opinions and perspectives, and valuing the strength of diversity in our society.
- ☐ Distinguish between fact and opinion when analyzing issues.
- ☐ Teach students to identify value-laden language that reveals built-in biases in materials. Look for these biases with different perspectives - such as "mining destroys the area" versus "mining alters the area."
- ☐ Have students scrutinize their own values that determine their positions on an issue.
- ☐ Have students gather information from as diverse an array of sources as possible.
- ☐ Determine if facts were "left out" or slanted because of the bias of the presenter or the materials.
- ☐ Teach students to raise questions which clarify the important positions in a controversy rather than attacking positions with which they do not agree.
- ☐ Recognize stereotyping and avoid the polarization that results. People and groups should not be strictly categorized. Include multiple players in the same "role" in simulations. Have these players hold different opinions to break down stereotyping.
- ☐ Use additional information, community resources,

and pointed questioning to assist students in 1) viewing differences in values and opinions as positive and 2) learning to disagree without degrading others. Emphasize that different points of view are not “right” or “wrong.”

- ☐ Include activities such as simulations, role-playing, creative writing, music, and dramatization. This will encourage students “to take positions temporarily” on issues that are different from the ones they currently hold in order to clarify the basis for differences. Have students explain how people within a group or a role could hold different views.
- ☐ Use realistic simulations and role playing activities where compromise and tradeoff situations are likely.
- ☐ Have students evaluate the effects of decisions made on future actions and problems.
- ☐ Include effects on different populations and aesthetic, social, cultural and long-term economic costs and benefits in any cost/benefit analysis or identification of impacts.
- ☐ Be as politically and religiously neutral as possible on value sensitive issues and clearly delineate your own opinions when presenting them.
- ☐ Work on finding agreement on controversial issues by using techniques such as nominal group approach or finding common words (in differing viewpoints).
- ☐ When possible, let students choose the topic or issue to be studied.
- ☐ Provide opportunities for students to make decisions and engage in actions dealing with the issue.



With the Community...

- ☐ Anticipate the controversial issues in the curriculum and inform parents about how the issues will be treated before they are introduced. Invite them to attend lessons on these topics.
- ☐ Be clear about the community values held and be cautious when examining opposing ones.
- ☐ If criticized for including a controversial issue in your lessons, do not respond defensively or with anger. Discuss your goals and your methods with critics so they can appreciate your sensitivity to their concerns.
- ☐ Before teaching the unit, obtain the support of the school administrator.

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**Teach about the
“real world”
with an
emphasis on
problem solving,
critical thinking,
and
citizenship skills.**



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Recommended Resource: "Measuring the Impact of Natural Resource Policy" by William R. Burch and Don Deluca (1984).